

# CWRmagazine

December 2020  
Volume 11, Number 6

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



## GOD IS WITH US

Even when he  
doesn't seem to be

Greg Albrecht  
—page 3



# What Our Readers Are Saying...

## Great Articles & Podcast

Really great messages in the October *CWRm* by Keith Giles (“Love Buts”), Brian Zahnd (“War of the Lamb”) and Greg Albrecht (“Loving Sinners – Hating Sins”). Religion refuses to accept that God is Love or that Revelation is about revealing God’s Love. These articles do such an outstanding job of explaining that. As Greg said, “Jesus told us that God is Love, no qualifications.”

**Texas**

I have been a podcast junkie for the last few years. Due to the nature of my job which is driving at night, I have listened to many podcasts and audiobooks about many different topics, and this one is my go to podcasts for my daily spiritual needs that gets to the heart of authentic Christianity. Thanks for all you do! I have also read and listened to other resources from you, amazing doesn’t explain my gratitude for your presence in the world.

**Indiana**

## Does God Abandon Us?

Regarding the *CWRblog* post, “Q&R with Brad: Isaiah 54:7-8 – Does God abandon us or hide his face?” (August 13, 2020), thank you for taking a difficult topic and breaking it down step-by-step to make beautiful sense. While I have walked toward this understanding, you have opened it up for me to a fullness that

makes *absolute sense* with the gospel and the *Logos* of God through Jesus.

**Email**

## Grace Is the Real Offense

I just read the August *CWRm* article “Grace is the Real Offense.” I was a school principal for almost ten years and you described my life. To the kids and parents in crisis there was always grace to apply, but the fury of other parents and of teachers when I would not expel or gave short suspensions, and in school discipline, with relationship building, was fierce. That is, until they were the one needing grace! Thanks for the article.

**Canada**

How desperately this sick and dying (physically and spiritually) world needs to hear and know the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I love and financially support *CWR/PTM* because under the leadership of Greg Albrecht, your entire team is devoted to Jesus.

Keep up “the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

**British Columbia**

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# GOD IS WITH US

## Even when he doesn't seem to be

Greg Albrecht

She had never been with a man — not even the man she was going to marry. As a bride-to-be, the teenage girl named Mary lived each day making plans, dreaming of the future and looking forward to her marriage. Everything was “normal” and her future seemed promising until an angel of the Lord appeared to her saying she was “highly favored” (Luke 1:28).

Just as Mary was mulling over what on earth “highly favored” meant the angel further explained, “You are to conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus” (Luke 1:31). Having a child before she was married was not high on the list of things to which Mary aspired — giving birth to a child before marriage whose father was anyone other than Joseph, her fiancé, would be a disaster!

When Mary reminded the angel she was a virgin, the angel told her “the Holy Spirit will come

on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Mary's mind was racing. As a young Jewish girl, she had heard stories about angels appearing to patriarchs and Old Testament prophets, but none of her family or friends had ever had a conversation with an angel. The fact that an angel had appeared to her and talked with her was troubling enough, but the details of his announcement had to blow Mary out of the water! We can safely assume she didn't run out and celebrate this news by having cake and ice cream with Joseph and her family.

She quickly processed this completely unexpected out-of-the-blue announcement — what would her family say when she started “showing”? What would her husband-to-be say and think? What would her friends and neighbors say about her on

the first century equivalent of social media? As far as Mary was concerned, this was the end of her life before it really got started!



The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary  
Mosaic — Washington, D.C.

### IN THIS ISSUE

- God Is With Us—Even when he doesn't seem to be** | Greg Albrecht 3  
**Phenomenal Cosmic Powers—Itty Bitty Living Space!** | Brad Jersak 8  
**The Season of Lights** | Ed Dunn 10  
**Christmas Presence** | Laura Urista 12  
**Centered in the Presence** | Richard Rohr 14  
**Love or Syrupy Sentimentalism?** | Brad Jersak 15

All she wanted was to get married, *then* have children and raise them with Joseph. Needless to say, this news turned her world upside down. God was reversing the traditional values Mary had been taught. *First* she would become pregnant, *then* she would get married. Really?

As she was “greatly troubled” (Luke 1:29) the assuring words of the angel calmed Mary’s emotions — **“For nothing is impossible with God”** (Luke 1:37, NKJV). Perhaps the presence of God rested in and with her in such a way that in the midst of her turmoil, God’s grace enabled this teenage girl to respond:

**“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled”** (Luke 1:38).

## **GOD WITH US, EVEN DURING COVID**

When the news of COVID-19 was first announced to us, we were all “greatly troubled,” like Mary was when her world was turned upside down. As each day and week went by the news became more confusing and stressful. Nothing like this had ever happened to anyone we knew. The world in which we had once lived did not “stay safe at home” or practice “social distancing.” We were used to shopping in grocery stores expecting shelves filled with toilet paper, among other things. We have been “carrying” the reality of this pandemic for about nine months, haven’t we?

The announcement of COVID-19 did not come from an

angel, but it turned our world upside down, didn’t it? We had heard of historical pandemics but we had never lived through one.

Looking back over the last nine months of this pandemic, governments and authorities are assessing whether they did enough, or whether they reacted quickly enough — it is not easy to face a power over which we have no control. It is tempting to adopt a similar judgment to our own lives as Christ-followers.

Did we wear our masks every time and place when we were told we must? Did we sanitize surfaces of furniture and devices with hand-wipe disinfectants as much as we should have? Did we wear gloves as prescribed? Were we greedy and did we hoard toilet paper and paper towels?

At the end of this “lost year,” as some are now calling 2020, we celebrate the birth of Jesus and we celebrate **“For nothing is impossible with God”** (Luke 1:37, NKJV). He did for us what we can never do for ourselves.

## **PERFORMANCE-BASED RELIGION CAN CO-OPT CHRISTMAS**

Within Christendom at large the celebration of the birth of Jesus, who does the impossible in and for and with us — doing for us what we can never do for ourselves — has become an orgy of spending and *doing*. Christmas experiences are often determined to be a success or failure on the basis of *how much is done*, how much money is spent, how many Christmas cards sent and

received — all of this *doing* can fog over and even obliterate the central focus. It’s about Jesus, not about us!

Many people experience Christmas as an annual test — the test is to make sure to spend enough money to buy friendship and love, for at least another year. Many feel compelled to send a card to people on their list, so that those people know they are loved. The idea of Christmas as it is observed by so many is all about an incredibly busy and stressful time, shopping, spending yourself into oblivion, often getting sick and hoping that somehow, some way, when Christmas finally comes you have *done enough*.

Isn’t that a definition and a microcosm of performance-based Christ-less religion? Christ-less religion is all about slaving away, working harder, doing more, giving more, being stressed and worried, hoping against hope that when all is said and done, God will be pleased enough so that he will let us into his kingdom of heaven.

While the actual emphasis and significance of Christmas is on what God in the person of Jesus does for us, the entire celebration can be co-opted by Christ-less, legalistic and oppressive religion so that it becomes one huge ordeal wherein people engage in an exasperating attempt to find some way to make family and friends and God happy with them.

Instead of Christmas being about what Jesus gives to us, it

can be twisted and corrupted into what we must give to others – and to God – so that he and others will be pleased enough by our performance to love us. Instead of Christmas being about the love of God that is freely given to one and all, Christ-less religion twists and perverts it into a nightmare where we have to prove our love to family and friends and God.

## **GOD IS WITH US EVEN IF HE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE**

Most of us immediately reacted to the terrifying pandemic news,

furiously “doing” all we could to prepare and protect ourselves and our loved ones. We purchased face masks and gloves and we stood in line for toilet paper and disinfectant wipes.

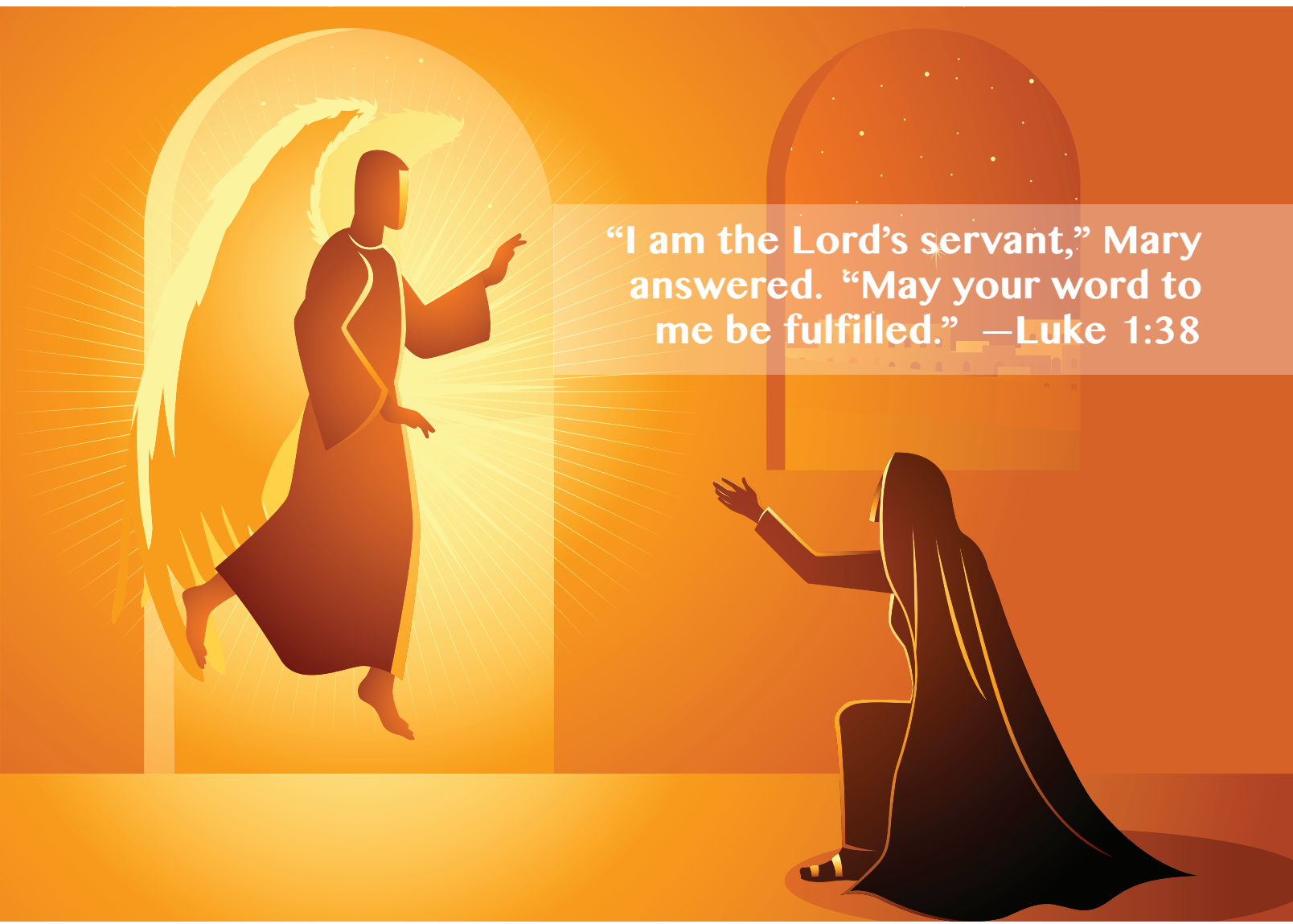
When we humans are faced with a threat, we hunker down and look for cover. It’s the normal and expected reaction, and there is certainly nothing wrong with self-preservation.

There were times over this last nine months, when the world seemed to be drastically changing, when so many were confused and worried, many wondered why God was silent –

was he powerless in the face of this pandemic – and if God by definition can do whatever he wants to, then why didn’t he do something?

When she heard that her world was about to be forever turned upside down, Mary searched for a firm foundation – for a precedent – for direction. Perhaps she thought of the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3). You remember the story, don’t you?

The story is set in the kingdom of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had constructed an idol of gold that



**“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” —Luke 1:38**

measured ninety feet high by nine feet wide. Perhaps he thought this idol would be a way of solidifying his own power by centralizing religious worship and placing it under his authority.

He directed, following the dedication of this idol, that this announcement be made by his herald: *“Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do:*

*As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace”* (Daniel 3:4-6).

This ultimatum was a grievous dilemma for all Jews who believed, as per the ten commandments, in worshipping only one God (Exodus 20:3) and therefore absolutely refused to *“bow down ... or worship ... an image in the form of anything ...”* (Exodus 20:4).

When some who hated the Jews in general, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (who were appointed as administrators in Nebuchadnezzar’s government structure)

specifically, reported that these three men would not bow down and worship the idol, Nebuchadnezzar was *“furious with rage”* (Daniel 3:13). When Nebuchadnezzar demanded to know if it was true – were they refusing to follow his order? –

*“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up”* (Daniel 3:16-18).

There Mary was, dreaming of her upcoming marriage and a life lived “happily ever after,” when she received a message that her life and expectations would be thrown into a blazing

furnace. There we were at the beginning of 2020, living life in an expected and “normal” way, when out of nowhere came the reality that life would not be the same as it had been. ***We were faced with a blazing furnace.***

God may not always answer our prayers in the way we want. God may not always “behave” in a manner consistent with our expectations. We may not know if God will deliver us from the fiery furnace, but our faith is that we will follow Jesus Christ ***even if he does not deliver us.***

The gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free from the fears and worries of the fiery furnaces of life, even if we do not survive them. The gospel of Jesus Christ assures us that Jesus is the fourth man walking around in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:24-25). Jesus is with us in the fire regardless of how hot the fire is and whether we think he is doing all that he should be doing.

Jesus is with us not because we do all the right things to protect, secure and immunize our lives,

but he is there because he is who he is. Jesus came because we cannot rescue ourselves from the dilemmas and pitfalls that face us in our lives.

**“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened by a yoke of slavery.” —Galatians 5:1**

## **GOD WITH US**

Christmas is about a baby, a really vulnerable baby, born into poverty, into a land that is militarily occupied, to a race of people who are horribly oppressed. God in the flesh – even though it didn’t seem like God is with us.

Christmas is about a baby whose life is threatened soon after his birth so that his family has to run to save his life – they have to become aliens and immigrants. That doesn’t seem like God with us, does it?

**Wait** – What about beautiful Christmas trees and expensive presents and lavish meals and feasts and huge choral concerts? Nothing at all in the Gospels about Joseph and Mary being so busy, buying presents, attending all kinds of church activities, baking cookies, having parties, going to concerts – none of that! Didn’t Joseph and Mary

get the memo – didn't they know what Christmas is all about?

When we perceive Christmas as God being with us even when he doesn't seem to be, we will focus our hearts and our souls on serving others in the name of Jesus, on picking up our cross and following Jesus and on losing our desires in the service of helping to fulfill the needs of others. The question is not what one will "get" for Christmas but what one may, by the grace of God, give to others – and even more so, what that little baby's birth gave us.

**So wait just a minute** – Christmas is really all about the love of God incarnated in a helpless baby who was hated from the get-go, a baby who would eventually be so despised he would be viciously crucified, even though all he did was to care, comfort, heal and help any and all.

**So wait just a minute** – Christmas is not about Jesus who comes and smacks down all our enemies. It's about Jesus who comes and gets smacked down by...well, let's see, by religion, wasn't it?

**So wait just a minute** – Christmas is about God

being with us even though he doesn't seem to be. Christmas is about God being who he is, in Jesus, not who we want him to be. Celebrating the birth of Jesus is not all about being desperately busy and stressed, decorating, sending cards, going places, hoping our family won't get upset with us, hoping someone in our family will come and visit us...

Because if that's what Christmas is all about, and if all of that is the true significance of Christmas, then Christmas is just one annual big disappointment because humans will always let us down. For that matter, we will always let others down because, in the end, if we are to be measured by how hard we work, how much money we spend, how much we do, it will never be enough, will it?

Christmas is about God rescuing us. It's about God doing for us what we can never do. It's about Jesus, God in the flesh, being with us, for us, and in us, even if he doesn't seem to be. □

*Greg Albrecht is president and pastor of Plain Truth Ministries." □*

**CWRp**ress

## Now Available: Letters to My Friends by Greg Albrecht

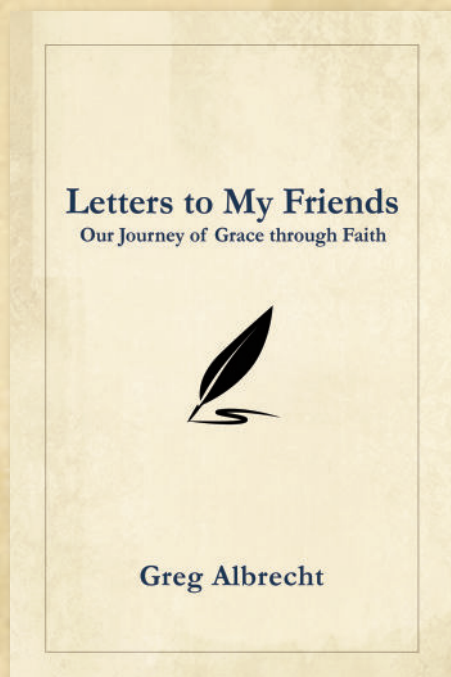


**Remember when you saved special letters and tied them, like treasures, with a ribbon in a big bundle?**

Is letter writing a lost art? After all, when emailing or texting, one doesn't need to bother with spelling and grammar. And now over 3,000 emojis-graphic images that follow the maxim that a picture is worth 10,000 words-are available on electronic devices saving the creative effort involved in creating word pictures.

Greg Albrecht has reviewed hundreds of inspirational and uplifting letters he has written for more than two decades. Since the last years of the 20th century, he has been sending a monthly "snail mail" letter to thousands of mail boxes (and more recently posting them electronically as well). He has selected a number of these messages and organized them, calling the collection *Letters to My Friends*.

**Order your 1st edition collector's item  
on Amazon or by calling **1-800-309-4466!****



# Phenomenal Cosmic Powers... Itty Bitty Living Space!

Brad Jersak

"Phenomenal cosmic powers ...  
Itty bitty living space."  
—Genie, Disney's *Aladdin*

When Disney's writers penned that line for the animated motion picture, *Aladdin*, they brilliantly and unknowingly encapsulated a central theme of Christian faith: the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Indeed, that we should find the Creator and Sustainer of the universe



laying in a manger infinitely exceeds jamming a powerful genie into a hand-held lantern. We cannot overstate the extremes:

## CONDESCENSION

On the one hand, consider the "cosmic Christ" who holds the whole world—no, the entire universe—in the palm of his hands. In fact, God the Father is called "Almighty" because through his Son, all things came into being:

*Through him [Jesus Christ] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:3).*

*For in him [the Word] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).*

*... in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe (Hebrews 1:2).*

And on the other hand, this same Christ who contains the universe within himself and fills the universe with himself also emptied himself into the world and took on the form of that singular child. God almighty (phenomenal cosmic powers) IS that baby nursing at a virgin's breast (itty bitty living space) and the Lamb who revealed God as infinite Love by dying on a Cross. You can't make this stuff up. It is the mystery that could only be revealed from the heavenly kingdom.

Talk about condescending to our lowly estate!



## UNION

But what neither Disney nor the genie myth ever imagined was how the condescension of Jesus Christ also accomplished a three-fold grand *union*.

Even when John's prologue says, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), we are sure to understate what that union of divine Word and human nature implies.

Beginning on the macro level, the Incarnation reveals the union of our Creator with *all of creation*. To resist our propensity for idolatry of created things, the Bible usually emphasizes the Creator-creation distinction. But in the body of Christ, Creator and creation become indivisible ... and maybe always had been. All the fullness of the Godhead AND all the fullness of creation are held together in that glorious unity which is the person of Jesus.

Narrowing our focus, the Incarnation specifically unites God and humanity. God the Word not only assumes a human body, soul and spirit. In Christ, *God unites himself to all humanity*. The life of the eternal God is poured into the human race through Jesus' identification with every man, woman and child on the planet.

And finally, since the Incarnation marks the unification of Creator and Creation, of God and humanity, it follows that Christ has identified with and united himself to you. And that union is



likewise indivisible. No separation! No abandonment! No condemnation! In him, you live and move and have your being. And conversely, he is forever with you and in truth, lives in you.

So many people, even Christ-followers, seem blind to this. That's sad because it impacts their experience of such a great

salvation. But the fact is that God no more turns from the "sinner" than the sun ceases to shine on the blind person. It's true anyway. But knowing it's true is life-changing good news! □

*Brad Jersak is the author of the CWRpress books A More Christlike God and A More Christlike Way.*

# THE SEASON OF LIGHTS

Ed Dunn

I remember Christmas time as a child. I remember riding together with my brothers and sisters in the backseat of our old family station wagon. As the days were short on sunlight during the wintery months in our particular part of Western Pennsylvania, many of our rides together took place after dark. We thought of ourselves as “country

a real seasonal treat.

As children, we were quite lucky. Our family station wagon featured a back seat that had been positioned smartly to face the rearview window. From that point-of-view, we could watch the world go by. You could bet your very best Christmas present on the fact that my brothers and sisters and I would fight hard for the view that backseat window

road, there was absolutely nothing to see as we’d look out that window. Just pitch-darkness all around us. And then, suddenly, there was everything to see.

Out of the darkness, the most beautiful lights, Christmas lights of red, green, blue and white, would burst into view and light up our world. Through the frosty glass we would “oooh!” and “ahhh!” as we watched the brilliant colors twinkle from the edges of a familiar farmhouse or the branches of a well-positioned pine. On, and then off, darkness, and then, light. We could’ve asked Dad to drive us around all night.

Our childhood memories can be one of the most precious aspects to any Christmas season. For me as a child, I must confess it was always all about “The Season of Lights.” The pure brilliance and beauty of the

**“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” —Matthew 5:14-16**

bumpkins” who grew up “in the sticks,” and as such, we knew if we could catch a glimpse of the Christmas lights from “town” on one of our rides, it would make for

would offer.

I remember the fun was in the anticipation. As Dad would drive us slowly out our long, wooded driveway and on to the paved “main”

colors, set against the darkness in places well-familiar, filled me with joy and hope. Whether drawing from memory or from anticipation, I knew I was home. We all were.

## **Remember, we live with Christ Jesus resident within us.**

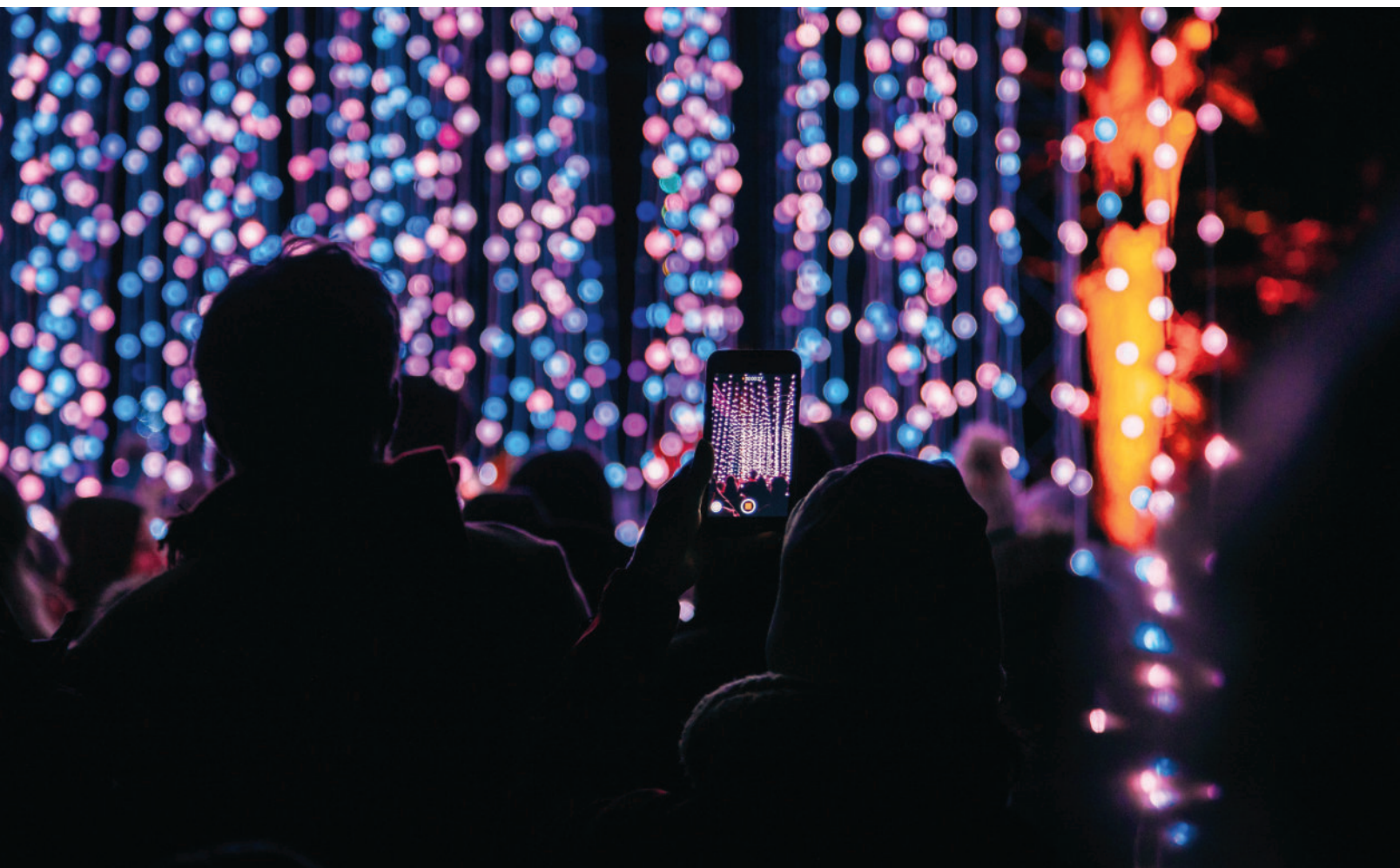
As we approach this Christmas season, a true season of lights, it is helpful to remember Christ Jesus is resident within us. We give thanks that we are no longer in the darkness. "You are the

light of the world," Jesus reminds his followers (Matthew 5:14). That light has a clear and visible purpose and cannot be hidden from view.

As Jesus has made his home with us, we make our home with him and with each other. We make our home in the world. In a very real sense, we together light up the world. Through our lives in him, we bring brilliant light to the darkness. We bring beautiful light, in many different colors, to each

other. To know this truth and to live from this light is to give joy and hope to the world. As that is what this Christmas season is truly all about, we share in this good news together. As Christ lives in us, he shines his light through us. By his grace, God illuminates the world with us, brilliant and beautiful lights, who reflect the Light of Christ. May you and yours have a brilliant and beautiful season of lights. □

*Ed Dunn is an Associate Editor of CWRm and PT magazines. He is currently publishing his first book, Peripheral: The Journey from Partial to Perfect Sight.*



# CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

LAURA URISTA

**W**e've celebrated many memorable Christmases over the years. Sometimes it was a trip or a special meal with all the family gathered in one place which made the day so memorable. But the one Christmas that stands out in my mind as the most unforgettable was not a very merry one. It is so special to me because I learned a valuable lesson.

It was December "1990-something" and our daughter, Tawny, wanted a new bike for Christmas. After much searching, my husband and I found a bike that was the perfect size and in her favorite color—purple. With smiles of anticipation, we beamed with pride and joy as our wide-eyed little girl opened the huge box. But those smiles of anticipation quickly turned into quizzical looks of disappointment, because the box did not exactly contain a shiny, new purple bike. Instead, the box was full of assorted metal and plastic parts along with a fairly thick booklet of technical directions on how to put the bike together.

When we ordered the bike, the fine print had said, "some assembly required." As it turned out, "*some* assembly" became an entire day clouded by growing frustration, anger and impatience, as it seemed a degree in mechanical engineering was required to put this child's bicycle together! All other presents that year paled by comparison as they were quickly opened and left behind, while we worked toward the all-consuming task of putting together "THE BIKE."

**The greatest gift is found in the time we spend together: Presence.**

At last, the bike was ready and Tawny was able to ride it for a few minutes before the sun went down on that "most memorable" Christmas Day.

Of course, she continued to enjoy riding her shiny purple bike for many days and months afterward. But I will never forget that Christmas and the lesson we learned spending the entire day caught up in the intricate details of bicycle assembly.

Fast-forward nearly thirty years to last year, December 2019. Our three-year-old granddaughter, Heather, asked for a green bicycle for Christmas. Both sets of grandparents decided to split the cost to purchase the special gift for her. But we suggested it would be well worth a little extra money to purchase a bicycle that was already assembled!

So, her special gift was ready to be enjoyed as soon as little Heather opened the package. My husband and I (AKA "Pops" and "Gaga") spent a perfect day watching Heather enjoy riding her new mint-green bike. We were able to truly enjoy playing with her and basking in the joy of watching her try new

things because we had learned a valuable lesson about enjoying the moment. Now that we are a little older and wiser, we better understand that the greatest gift is not found in material things, but rather in the *time* we spend together with loved ones. In other words, enjoying each other's *presence* as much or more than the *presents*.

It is so easy to get distracted and caught up in all the details



of trying to create the perfect Christmas for our families. But as I look forward to celebrating Christmas this year, it is my prayer that we will all make an effort to be intentionally focused on the *presence* of the One this day is all about. I pray that we will take time to deliberately celebrate *Emmanuel—God with us*. I pray that we will spend time focused on the Creator of the universe who became a tiny infant in order to be with us—his creation—and call us family. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus made a way for us to be with him and with all our loved ones forever. Jesus is the *reason for the season* and he is, was and always will be the most memorable Christmas present (and *PRESENCE*) ever. □

*Laura Urista is the Managing Editor of CWRm and PT magazine.*

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# CENTERED IN THE PRESENCE

Richard Rohr

**M**ost religious people I've met—from sincere laypeople to priests and nuns—still imagine God to be elsewhere. Before you can take the *now* seriously, you must shift from thinking of God as *out there* to also knowing God *in here*. In fact, that is the best access point! Only inner experience can bring about a healing of the human-divine split.



Transformation comes by realizing your union with God right here, right now—regardless of any performance or achievement on your part. That is the core meaning of grace. But you have to *know* this for yourself. No one can do this knowing for you. I could tell you that God is not elsewhere and heaven is not later, but until you come to personally and regularly experience that, you will not believe it.

Authentic Christianity overcame the *God-is-elsewhere* idea in at least two major and foundational ways. Through the Incarnation, God in Jesus became flesh; God visibly moved in with the material world to help us overcome the illusion of separation (John 1:14). Secondly, God as Holy Spirit, is precisely known as an indwelling and vitalizing presence. By itself, intellectual assent to these two truths does little. The Incarnation and Indwelling Spirit are known only through participation and practice, when you actively draw upon such Infinite Sources. “Use it or lose it!”

Good theology helps us know that we can fully trust the “now” because of the Incarnation and the Spirit within us. It’s like making love. We can’t be fully intimate with someone who is physically absent or through vague, amorphous energy; we need close, concrete, particular connections. That’s how our human brains are wired.

Jesus teaches and is himself a message of now-ness, here-ness, concrete-ness, and this-ness. The only time Jesus talks about future time is when he tells us not to worry about it (see Matthew 6:25-34). Don’t worry about times and seasons, don’t worry about when God will return, don’t worry about tomorrow. Thinking about the future keeps us in our heads, far from presence. Jesus talks about the past in terms of forgiving it. Some say forgiveness is central to his whole message. Jesus tells us to hand the past over to the mercy and action of God. We do not need to keep replaying the past, atoning for it, or agonizing about it.

Yet, as practitioners of meditation have discovered, the mind can only do two things: replay the past and plan or worry about the future. The mind is always bored in the present. So it must be trained to stop running backward and forward. This is the role of contemplation. □

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Living the Eternal Now* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2005).



**CWR**<sub>m</sub>  
**BRAD JERSAK**

## Pastoral Perspective

### Love or Syrupy Sentimentalism?

**QUESTION:** *Isn't your emphasis on "love" really just syrupy sentimentalism?* The whole "Love Wins" thing sounds great, but in the real world, I don't see it working.

**RESPONSE:** To reduce love to syrupy sentimentalism, as I suppose many do, drains love of its gritty power.

When I say that love is *gritty*, I'm talking about the type of resilience it takes to engage this hard world, so corrupted by injustice and cruelty.

When systems of oppression grind away at our humanity, it is normal—even healthy and necessary—to feel hurt, anger and outrage at the evils that people commit. But as the apostle James once said, "the wrath of man cannot generate the justice God wants" (James 1:20 my translation).

Nor would a so-called "love" that is saccharine sweet. The type of love that overcomes evil with good requires true grit—a fire in one's bones that you see in the prophet Jeremiah (20:9).

While Jeremiah is often referred to as "the weeping prophet," his tears were not merely his own. He was weeping the tears of God, grieving for the great R-rated tragedies of Jerusalem that make 2020 look like a carnival in comparison.

Those tears represent the way that gritty love becomes agitated and then agitates. For love is not passive and silent when God's precious children experience affliction... or when they inflict it. Real love is bothered when people are mean. Real love doesn't turn a blind eye or bite its tongue. Real love is agitated when anyone is belittled or excluded or trampled down. Real love both cries and it cries out. And that's when love agitates.

Jeremiah agitated against child sacrifice, against the corrupt temple, against oppression of the poor and against workplace inequity—and he was just warming up.

But for all the prophet Jerry's agitation and agitating, don't forget that what drove his message was divine love for real people locked in disparate situations. He wasn't a self-congratulating ally of the "great a-woke-ning," deluding himself that "doing justice" amounted to posting clever memes.

His love had the kind of persistent grit that keeps asking inconvenient questions and risks being "unfriended"... but also keeps showing up to do the unglamorous works of love and justice, year after year.

So we ask, was it syrupy sentimentalism that got Jeremiah incarcerated at the bottom of a well? Was Isaiah's message a saccharine spirituality that led to his body being sawn in two? Was it a pasty passive love that ultimately got Jesus crucified?

Not on your life. Literally. The gritty love of the prophets, the apostles and the Lord seemed to have a consistent outcome: martyrdom.

That said, that brand of resilient love was anything but powerless.

Sure, to the untrained eye, our heroes of the faith looked like their love was in vain, defeated and debunked. But the testimony of those martyrs was, "We multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christ-followers is seed." That is, trying to snuff out authentic Christian love is as ineffectual as trying to kill dandelions by blowing on their ripe heads.

Why was that? Because what could not be snuffed out, what endured over millennia, was always the courageous love that led each of these faithful witnesses to forgive the unforgivable, to release their oppressors from condemnation, and to radiate the cross-shaped kindness of God that withers cruelty and overcomes enemies by making them friends through the inexplicable embrace of Christ-in-us. In many cases, opponents miraculously began to feel Someone loving them from the inside and they could not turn away.

So, syrupy sentimentalism? Not on your life. □

**Love is not syrupy.  
It is gritty and powerful.**

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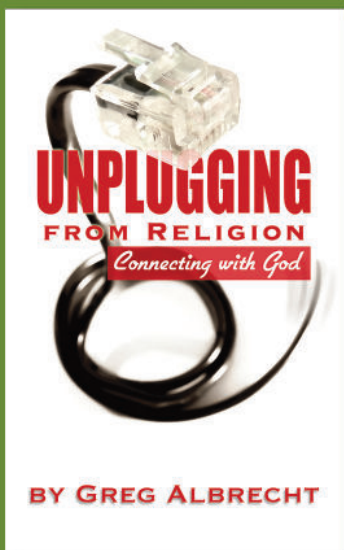
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